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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2037

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 000216

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2019

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIA: CHARISMATIC GOVERNOR DOMINATES SALZBURG ELECTIONS

Classified by: Acting Economic-Political Counselor Philip Kaplan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: Gabi Burgstaller, the charismatic governor of Salzburg Province, is expected to lead the Social Democrats (SPO) to a first place finish in the March 1 provincial elections. After the vote, Burgstaller is likely to renew the SPO's alliance with the conservative People's Party (OVP), projected to finish second, Salzburg contacts told us. While the vast majority of municipal mayors in the province are OVP, party leaders from across the political spectrum say Burgstaller's popularity trumps party loyalty at the provincial level. The far right Freedom Party (FPO) is expected to finish third with a higher vote total than in the previous elections, reflecting a national resurgence. End Summary.

Charismatic Governor Dominates Race

¶2. (U) Polchief and Pol FSN traveled to Salzburg February 18-20 to discuss the provincial elections. Our contacts across the political spectrum cited the overwhelming popularity of Governor Burgstaller (SPO) as the dominant factor in the campaign. Burgstaller, a 45-year-old attorney, was first elected governor in 2004, garnering an impressive 45 percent of the vote in a crowded field. Her victory displaced the OVP from the Governor's Office, which it had occupied uninterrupted since the end of World War II. Burgstaller has said she expects the SPO to receive about 40 percent of the vote this time, and has pledged to resign from the provincial party leadership if the SPO fails to finish in first place. Both the polls, which predict SPO will lead the pack with about 43 percent, and our contacts indicate she has little to worry about.

¶3. (SBU) Our contacts also agreed that voters will be swayed by personalities, not issues. This is a source of frustration for the OVP, which is projected to finish second with about 39 percent. Anton Santner, OVP provincial party manager, told us the OVP fell to Burgstaller in 2004 because its top candidate, incumbent Governor Franz Schausberger, lacked public appeal. Since then, the party has recovered to a certain extent, but will not be able to unseat Burgstaller under the leadership of top candidate Wilfried Haslauer, the rather lackluster son of a longstanding Salzburg governor of the same name, he said. Though Haslauer is bright and highly qualified, he comes across as aloof and cannot compete with Burgstaller on TV or in front of a crowd, he said.

OVP Dominates at Municipal Level

¶4. (U) Christian Struber, head of an OVP district organization, told us Salzburg remains an essentially conservative province, noting that 89 out of 119 municipal mayors are OVP. That is not expected to change; a significant number of OVP mayors are running unopposed, and

many others are far ahead in the polls. The mayors are directly elected, which means voters can cast ballots for an OVP mayor, and then vote SPO for the provincial legislature. Struber argued that the numbers prove that many of them are doing just that, as Burgstaller's popularity trumps OVP party loyalty. Christian Stoeckl, OVP mayor of Hallein, observed to us that the once clear ideological distinctions between the SPO and OVP have faded during the last half century as the two parties have dominated Austrian politics. As a result, voters in Salzburg and across Austria are making judgments based on the personalities of individual candidates.

¶15. (U) SPO provincial party manager Uwe Hoefferer acknowledged that the SPO owes its success in Salzburg to Burgstaller's charisma. He argued that it is only natural for voters to respond to a "genuine, down to earth" candidate. But Burgstaller can govern as well as she can campaign; if she couldn't, the voters would have abandoned her after five years in office, he said.

New "Grand Coalition" Expected

¶16. (U) The SPO and OVP currently form a "Grand Coalition" government in Salzburg, and are expected to renew their alliance after the March 1 vote. The OVP has been warning of a possible coalition between the SPO and the far right FPO -- OVP campaign posters urge voters to back the OVP in order to prevent such an outcome. But this is considered highly unlikely. The OVP's Santner laughed when we asked him if he believed the SPO would team up with the FPO. "Look, it's a

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campaign," he said. "We're using that idea to mobilize voters." Hoefferer, of the SPO, noted that polls indicate that 60 percent of voters favor an SPO-OVP coalition, far more than back any other option.

FPO On Rise, Greens, BZO Remain Weak

¶17. (U) The FPO is expected to finish third, with as high as 13 percent, up from 9 percent in 2004, reflecting a nationwide resurgence fueled by young voters (Austria in 2007 lowered the voting age to 16) and concerns about integration. The BZO, the FPO split-off party founded by the late Jorg Haider, is expected to garner only 2-3 percent of the vote, short of the requirement to enter parliament. Top BZO candidate Markus Fauland was, nevertheless, optimistic, predicting to us that the party would draw 5 percent and earn two legislative seats. The Green party is expected to garner about 7 percent. Green provincial MP Heidi Reiter was downbeat, telling us the media have been ignoring the Green campaign, and that voters are reluctant to embrace Green issues in difficult economic times.

Comment: A Rising Political Talent

¶18. (C) Burgstaller is a rising political talent. Few, if any, Austrian politicians can match her ability to connect with voters. She will almost certainly lead her party to another Grand Coalition with the OVP. The OVP remains strong at the municipal level, and the coalition partners get along well in the province. Burgstaller has little reason to snub the SPO's traditional partner in favor of the controversial, xenophobic FPO. Nevertheless, an improved performance by the FPO in Salzburg and other provinces holding elections this year could prove to be a disturbing trend, particularly if the economic crisis heightens tensions over integration.

KILNER